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AUTHOR McQuail, Josephine A.
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ABSTRACT

Whatever the view an educator takes of collaborative learning, it does seem that it takes a lot of class time. However, computer networking capabilities allow for all the advantages of collaborative learning without requiring the instructor to devote large blocks of precious in-class time to encourage it. Five good ways to use networking capabilities in literature classrooms are as follows: (1) requiring students to read shared electronic journals; (2) responding to these journals; (3) requiring them to communicate among themselves via electronic mail; (4) requiring them to send messages to; and (5) receive messages from on-line discussion groups. After students are oriented to the computer and its capabilities in terms of electronic mail, they are required to keep a literature journal which is graded periodically. After grading, the journal contents are placed in a large compilation file available to students via the computer. Students can then respond to the journal compilation through bulletin board systems. Examples of student responses to "Jane Eyre" show how fully engaged students are by this medium. Students are also encouraged to send each other electronic mail. Still another means of encouraging student exchange about literature come to students via the Network News, a world-wide bulletin board system available to everyone on the VAX. Thousands of newsgroups, representing a whole array of topics, from academic to recreational, are listed on the bulletin board which all users can access and peruse. (TB)

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ELECTRONIC EXCHANGES: FIVE WAYS TO USE ELECTRONIC NETWORKING IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Dr. Josephine A. McQuail
Tennessee Technological University
Box 5053 English Department
Cookeville TN 38505
(615) 372-3343

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ELECTRONIC EXCHANGES:
FIVE WAYS TO USE ELECTRONIC NETWORKING
IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Collaborative learning as a pedagogical method has had a long history, as Mara Holt's recent article "Knowledge, Social Relations, and Authority in Collaborative Practices of the 1930s and 1950s" demonstrates. Holt points out that some critics of the method have traditionally resisted it because of its perceived tendency to undermine the instructor's authority and to disrupt the conventionally structured lecture classroom (Holt 547). Such a view condemns collaborative learning in the classroom as a waste of time. Whatever one's view of collaborative learning, it does seem to be the case that group work takes a large amount of class time (Furnham 49). However, computer networking capabilities allow for all of the advantages of collaborative learning without requiring the instructor to devote large blocks of precious in-class time to encourage it. I have found five good ways to use networking capabilities in my literature classrooms by 1) requiring students to read shared electronic journals and 2) respond to them; 3) communicate among themselves via electronic mail; 4) send messages to and 5) receive messages from on-line discussion groups (newsgroups).

SETTING UP THE ELECTRONIC LITERATURE CLASSROOM

While I am myself reluctant to devote class time to involved group projects, I have always been a believer in collaborative ventures as a way of engaging students in the learning process. Once, at U.C. Berkeley where I was a graduate student, I received a grant to distribute a bound volume consisting of students' essays from the composition class. I asked them a question on the final requiring them to refer to their anthology of student essays as a way of ensuring that they had read it. Since coming to my present institution and taking advantage of its VAX computer system, I have found that computer networking capabilities provide an easy (and free) alternative to more cumbersome approaches, at the same time introducing students to or encouraging them to use new technologies that are only going to become more vital into the 21st century. Even in the very few years I have been here, my institution has expanded its networking capabilities, and I have consequently begun to make different assignments to my classes to ensure that they have experience with various networking capabilities.

Students here have access via many terminals to a VAX computer, manufactured by Digital Equipment Corporation, which runs under the VMS operating system. Each user is given an account name, made up of the student's initials and the last four digits of the student's social security number, and a password with which the individual may access her or his account. It is possible to communicate between individual accounts via electronic mail. Files can be sent via electronic mail from one student to another,

from one student to the rest of the class, or from me to all the students in a class, or I can make a file public so that students may view it simply by calling it up, or even copy it. This electronic communication obviously has a great advantage over that on paper.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS

ON WRITING AND READING THE JOURNALS

After they get an orientation in class from one of the employees of the D. W. Mattson computer lab, I require students to go into the lab outside of class time and write a journal for the class on the VAX. They must send this to me periodically throughout the semester. I grade the journals using a system that to me seems suitable for off-the-cuff writing and also does not require a lot of agonizing over the grade: check + (A), check (B), and check - (C), with check ++ (A+) and check -- (D) or a 0 grade also possibilities.[1] Once I receive a set of journals, I collapse them into one long file, omitting names and other identifying features. I have decided that making the journal compilations public is the best way to get the group journals to the students because sometimes they are so long that they clutter up the students' computer accounts. In the next journal, they are required to keep their regular journals and also make several references to the group journal record. For subsequent journals, I again anonymously combine the journals, and for the next journal they

[1]One suggestion: keep a "hard" copy of journals which you read in grading this student writing. It's easier to focus on a printout than a screen. Also, if a student has a question about the grade she or he received you will have your printout and notes as a record.

also make comments on the group journals. This process guarantees collaborative learning simply because the students read what their classmates have written. It could not really be carried out in any other forum than the electronic one -- the method would be impossibly unwieldy for journals done on paper.

On the syllabus I make suggestions for the kinds of comments they might include in their journals, but students come up with many different styles of journals. Some keep a journal that makes reference to every single literary work we've read. Some respond only to some works or topics which they find interesting. Both of these approaches are acceptable. What I tell them is *not* desirable are journals that are transcriptions of class notes or other commentary. Some students, in scrolling through the group journal compilation, invariably notice and critique journals that demonstrate a lack of originality. This is one useful purpose journals serve: to reinforce my points on such matters.

STUDENTS RESPOND TO JOURNALS

Peer reaction is also useful when it comes to more substantive matters which pertain to the literature we study. For instance, my sophomore students tend to resist the contention that in the novel *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë might be seen as betraying the tenets of feminism in the basically sado-masochistic relationship she depicts between Rochester and Jane. When students' journal comments reinforce this message, as some invariably do, my points are underscored. For example, one student recorded the following diatribe (which caused another to remark that he would make a "good husband"!):

> . . . it kind of ticks me off every time I read a book or see a movie where the heroine chucks life-fulfilling happiness and pleasure to the wind for the sake of being a "good little girl." . . . It's true that Brontë lived in Victorian England, and that women's lib was something akin to little green men from Mars, but taking *Jane Eyre* in the modern context, I can still see the same story (to a certain extent) unfolding all around. It's always up to Jane to see that the proper thing is done, and SHE is always the one to do the "proper" thing. Why not do the improper; or the unspeakable? Why not be happy doing it?
>
> Jane . . . had she gone ahead and done what her heart most likely wanted her to do, would have been a "tramp" or a "whore." Most "mistresses" are thought of in this regard, are they not? Today's society brands promiscuous males as "studs," but uninhibited females as "sluts." A man wouldn't dream of marrying a "slut" because she's "soiled," but it never enters his feeble mind that he is just as much a slut as she. So, if "slut" and "stud" connote identical behavior, where is the opinion that no woman would want to mary a "stud"?

This student's comments point out not only the double standard between males and females that existed in Brontë's day but emphasize that it still exists in our own time. Most other students fall so fully for the happy ending of the story of Jane Eyre that they often fail to recognize such subtleties as the way the monstrous Bertha Mason represents the angry side of Jane. The student's

remarks above recognize the underside of Brontë's text and points out how she was forced to conform to Victorian notions of female propriety.

There is a difficutly in moderating students' reactions, however. One response to the above entry accused the writer of adopting a condescending attitude toward women and went on to talk about the favoritism shown to women on campus because the women's dorms are equipped with computers while the men's are not. The student who commented that the journal writer quoted in the long passage above would make a good husband also disagreed with him "that Jane was wrong for respecting her morals and doing what she thought was right. . . . If Jane had ignored her beliefs, I believe she would have never been happy with herself." However, as long as students make insightful comments, the group journals will continue to be, in my opinion, worthwhile ventures.

Another student picked up on the myth of love as presented in *Jane Eyre*. In the context of the ending of the novel I lectured about the harmfulness of the notion of sacrificing all for love, as Jane may be perceived as doing. The comments below emphasized my point, and added insight to the problem of violence in our society:

> After reading the group journals I realize how many people think romance is the all-powerful emotion and motivation. People spoke of the "romance" of the poems, and how they liked these poems so much better. Isn't this a little frightening? If our world really was guided by love,

> then we should be living in a land of peace and concern. As it is, we live in one of the most violent nations in the world.

Such remarks invited discussion of domestic violence, a scenario that also could be seen as nascent in the situation of Rochester and Jane in Brontë's novel.

In fact, the journal just quoted would provide an excellent topic for class discussion. The instructor can read from the journal entries in the classroom and use that as a springboard for class discussion. I learn from the students' journals, too. Among other things, I discover their enthusiasms, their hates, areas they might be confused about, or topics that may need further discussion in class.

However, it seems a peculiarity of the electronic medium to get "flames," or overzealous critiques from other e-mail users -- whether it is the nature of the exchange, or the tendency encouraged by the ability to instantly transmit the message to be premature in sending an emotional, unconsidered response (Seabrook, *Flame,* 70-1 ; Douglas 19) this can sometimes be the case. Indeed, the one drawback of the shared journals has been a tendency for students to be over-severe in their critiques of others' work: spelling, grammar, opinions, all may get viciously slammed in the journal commentaries, although I caution against this.

If it may contribute to the likelihood of overcritical remarks, the anonymity of the combined journals releases students from the self-consciousness and even in some cases outright humiliation

that would result were I to leave their names on their journals before sharing them. This anonymity might also contribute to the occasional acrimonious responses because students perhaps do not see an individual behind the original entry. Perhaps a solution would be to have the students use "handles" or nicknames which they could use to sign their journals.

GOING INTO A THIRD DIMENSION

By expanding into several other directions with electronic mail in classes I am attempting to address these aberrations. I am encouraging students to supplement their journal entries by sending messages to the entire class if they see something in the journals they want to discuss, or if another issue comes up in which they think the class would be interested. This is easily accomplished through a distribution list of all the user names of members of the class and also my own user name which I send them, along with instructions on how to set up the distribution list so messages to the entire class will be sent automatically. Some members of the class have used this option on occasion; I use it often to send homework assignments, paper topics, and instructions to students.

NETWORK NEWS

A much broader dimension for networking has recently become possible. My institution has just made available Network News, a world-wide bulletin board system, available to everyone on the VAX. Thousands of newsgroups are listed on the bulletin board which all users can access and peruse. These newsgroups are on a whole array of topics, from academic to recreational. The

advantage of the bulletin board is that one can scroll through newsgroups without actually subscribing to them and having them be sent into one's account where they would take up the user's disk space. Students had the option of subscribing to a newsgroup or sending a message (called an "article" in Network News lingo) at some point in the semester to a newsgroup of their choosing in the list in Network News. This encourages students to begin using the capabilities of the Internet, which offers a myriad of resources which will only become more important as we approach the 21st century. Right now, only a third of American households uses personal computers (Marino 11). If people were aware of what is available on networks many more would get the basic equipment needed to plug in at home: a computer and a modem. As it is, the information available through Internet and other networks is astounding: catalogues of books from libraries all over the world, online texts, music and images from films and other sources, all kinds of information archives.

Even students who seem most comfortable on the VAX in class confess to being ignorant on the availablity of Network News (admittedly new), but without exposure to and encouragement to use new networking or informational capabilities most students are unlikely to explore it. The slight prod applied in class seems to make them aware of what is available, and, when I asked them in a written questionnaire, most indicated that they will use Network News again in the future.

Nearly all of the articles students sent out were points of information: they either requested or provided information.

Students have so far been equally divided between those who write to a recreational group involving, among other things, cars, music, and computers (rec.autos.chrysler, rec.music, comp.os.ms-windows), and those who write to an academically-oriented group. Even these so-called recreational groups provide educational opportunities and allow students to share and request knowledge. One student, responding to a question about a windows upgrade in which the questioner asks for the upgrade on the Internet, wrote the following:

> I'm sure there is an upgrade, but I don't know that it would be on the Internet (illegal probably). I have 3.11, but I didn't upgrade to it from 3.1. I started out with 3.11. The main difference is with 3.11 you can set your computer up to use on a network. Also, there are numerous updates on printer drivers, sound drivers, etc.

This student shows an awareness of copyright law, one healthy reminder of ethical behavior on the Internet which (judging from some of the messages on various internet groups) users sometimes ignore. Requiring students to correspond with electronic mail groups allows the instructor to go over guidelines of "Netiquette," as it's termed. The D.W. Mattson Computer Center has compiled the following rules:

1. Unless the subject is of interest to many participants, respond to the author of an article privately (via e-mail).
2. When seeking information, request personal replies and then summarize to the group.

3. Use descriptive subject lines (for example, "Q: Saving Allocatable Vars in Fortran 90" rather than "Fortran Question").

4. Select the appropriate newsgroup for your article.

5. Use correct spelling and grammar to facilitate clear communication.

6. Keep your signature short (maximum of four lines) and minimize the amount of quoted material in responses.

7. Don't post to a group until you have read it for a while (at least a week or two). Many newsgroups have their own conventions, and frequently-asked questions files are posted periodically.[1]

Requiring students to subscribe to an academic, discipline-oriented news group in the course of the semester would be a wonderful way to keep students informed of topics of debate among professionals in the field and also would inevitably prove to be illuminating on the subjects studied in the course. I do belong to a few discussion lists myself, including one devoted to William Blake. I sent students in my British literature survey class a few relevant articles from this group along with instructions on how to subscribe to it. Other e-mail discussion lists from which I have forwarded messages to my classes include the Ansax (Anglo-Saxon) network, which had an illuminating ongoing

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[1]On-line versions of these guidelines appear in "Rules for Posting to Usenet" by Mark Horton, "A Primer on How to Work with the Usenet Community" by Chuq Von Rospach and updated by Gene Spatford and Mark Moraes, and the deliciously satirical "Emily Postnews" by Brad Templeton.

discussion of Beowulf and Grendel at the time I was teaching the British literature survey of medieval to neoclassical works, the Blake newsgroup, which relayed messages involving a decision to make facsimiles of Blake's works after the World War II blitz bombing of London, where many of Blake's unique works are still housed, environmental issues and Blake, and a flaming review of a current book on Blake. Virtually any conceivable kind of class could be provided with one or several newsgroups to supplement class discussion.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING IN INCREASING COMPUTER LITERACY

Students again and again express their gratitude to me in making the group journals available to them. They particularly enjoy access to their classmates' minds, but along the way they get practice with the basics of communication via electronic networks, and experience on a computer. Instructors owe it to their students to educate them about the possibilities of such networking opportunities. In the future, students who lack knowledge and experience on networks like the Internet are going to find a whole world closed to them. Computer literacy and the ability to communicate and conduct reasearch on electronic networks are going to be vital necessities in the 21st century. In fact, *Newsweek* magazine reports that in February 1994

> Laura D'Andrea Tyson, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, released a study showing that in all job categories from clerks to professionals, people who know how to work with computers earn more than those who

> don't. In fact, the difference between the two groups accounts for half the increasing wage gap between high-school and college graduates. (Kantrowitz, with Chideya and Biddle 78).

These statistics indicate how vital it is that students at all levels, even in English and language arts, are encouraged to use computers. In fact, it is precisely in English and language arts classes that students should get the experience with text files that will be the most useful and practical in a broad range of professions to which many will apply upon matriculation.

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